

**International students from Africa:**  
**The impact that living in South Africa has on one's sense of identity**

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A research report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Clinical Psychology.

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**Declaration**

I declare that this research report is my own, unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Clinical Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at this or any other university.

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Johannesburg, 2009

## **Abstract**

This research report concerns the effect that living in South Africa has on international students' (from Africa) sense of identity. In general, living abroad has been found to be challenging and traumatic in dealing with an unfamiliar environment and a different cultural mentality. In South Africa this may be further complicated by the atmosphere of xenophobia. There has been much research on the problems that international students encounter whilst living abroad, but there is a paucity of research on international students in South Africa, and in general, there is a paucity of research on understanding (from a psychoanalytic perspective) the impact that living abroad has on international student's sense of identity. The present study involved semi-structured interviews with international students from Africa, at the University of the Witwatersrand, asking questions about the difficulties in adapting to life in South Africa, as well as the shifts that the participants perceived in their identity as a result. The analysis was qualitative in nature and both thematic content analysis and interpretative phenomenological analysis were used in order to capture both a naturalistic description, as well as a richer, more interpretive sense of the data in terms of how the participants made sense of their experiences in South Africa. Analysis revealed: a) a range of difficulties in acculturating to life in South Africa, including feelings of loneliness, fear and alienation; b) a number of successful adaptive strategies, such as relying on social support from family members and other international students; c) a range of intrapsychic responses (defined psychodynamically), such as regression and splitting. The latter were discussed within the framework of Erikson's theory of identity development.

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## **Table of contents:**

### **Chapter One**

1. Introduction	1
1.1. Rationale	3
1.2. Research question	4

### **Chapter Two**

2. Literature review	5
2.1. Problems experienced by international students	5
2.2. Psychosocial factors	6
2.2.1. Social support	6
2.2.2. Cultural differences	7
2.2.3. Social relations	8
2.2.4. Language and social norms	9
2.3. Models of understanding the effects of migration	9
2.4. Coping strategies and interventions	13
2.5. Psychoanalytic models applied to migration	14
2.6. Erikson	22
2.6.1. Model of the life cycle	23
2.6.2. Theory of identity formation as a paradigm for understanding migration	24

### **Chapter Three**

3. Method	27
3.1. Research design	27

3.2. Procedure	27
3.3. Participants	28
3.4. Data collection tool	29
3.5. Analysis	29
3.6. Ethics	31
<b>Chapter Four</b>	
4. Results	34
4.1. Results obtained through thematic content analysis	34
4.2. Results obtained through interpretative phenomenological analysis	51
<b>Chapter Five</b>	
5. Discussion	61
5.1. Discussion of the findings from thematic content analysis	61
5.2. Discussion of the findings from interpretative phenomenological analysis	65
5.3. Conclusion	73
5.4. Limitations	74
5.5. Recommendations	75
<b>Reference list</b>	76
<b>Appendices</b>	81
Appendix A: Ethics clearance certificate	81
Appendix B: Cover letter to the Director and / or Deputy Director of the Wits International Office	82

Appendix C: Consent form for the Director and / or Deputy Director of the Wits International Office	84
Appendix D: Cover letter to the international students	85
Appendix E: Consent form (interviewed) for the international students	88
Appendix F: Consent form (recorded) for the international students	89
Appendix G: Semi-structured interview schedule	90
Appendix H: Demographic questionnaire	91